# Apology emails - when are they really necessary?

By Georgia Christian                                                    16 May 2011

Inevitably, somewhere along the course of your career, you have (or might still) hit the email send button and realise just a few seconds too late that there was an error in the campaign you have just blasted off to your entire subscriber list. It kind of gives you that sinking feeling in your stomach, doesn't it?

I'm going to say don't panic, even though it is a natural reaction to do so, but the truth is that you're only human and these things happen, often despite any meticulous undertakings to avoid it. These slip-ups could be anything from a grammar or spelling mistake, slightly misleading subject line, incorrect or broken links, non-corresponding landing pages, incorrect offer/promotion details, rendering problems, or the fact that you've just sent a campaign with specials to New Zealand (enticing pictures of the Christchurch Cathedral included) the day after they suffered a major earthquake. This did in fact happen (not to us), but the fact is that the campaign was completed and scheduled weeks before the catastrophe happened and the emails were sent unknowingly.

What you need to realise is that there are times when a grovelling apology email is necessary, such as in the NZ example above, and there are times when you should just let sleeping dogs lie, for example minor spelling mistakes.

The general rule of thumb is that if the error is not likely going to result in lost revenue or significant brand damage, and if it's unlikely to offend your subscribers then let those sleeping dogs lie.

**So, what falls under this category?**

- Minor spelling and grammar errors and minor personalisation slip ups (perhaps you wanted to say Dear Joe, but said Dear Subscriber instead). There's a good chance here that your subscriber didn't even notice the spelling or grammar mistake and in terms of the personalisation, while it is really important that customers don't just feel like a number, if the content of your email remains relevant and highly targeted, you can still get away with it.

**What does warrant a (grovelling) apology email?**

- Major rendering problems (your email came out looking more like a Picasso sketch)
- The subject line and the offer in the body content of your email aren't in sync, or the body copy isn't in sync with the landing page.
- Broken or incorrect links

- The wrong emails were sent to the wrong recipients when it was deployed, resulting in subscribers getting irrelevant and untargeted campaigns.

Alright, so you know that you've erred seriously, what's next? The first thing you need to do, if you've noticed the problem immediately after deployment, is to halt the sending process. This of course should greatly reduce the number of subscribers affected and added to this you can take it one step further and see who actually opened or clicked through the offending email, which means you can target the exact people that are affected.

Obviously, your apology email needs to convey genuine regret but what else can you do to soften the blow?

1. Be quick. You need to send out the apology as soon as possible, ideally, the very same day.
2. Make it absolutely clear in the subject line what the purpose of the email is, for example: 'We're Sorry!', 'We Messed up Yesterday', 'Correction: 50% off...', 'Apologies for the broken link!' You get the idea.
3. Do **not** turn your apology email into any kind of sales pitch. In fact, the more it looks like a normal email the better. Keep the template simple and clean. If however, your previous email campaign was time sensitive and customers couldn't take advantage of the offer because of a server issue, incorrect landing page or broken link, then by all means extend the offer and let them know that the problem's been fixed and they still have time to check it out.
4. Know when to be serious and know when it's ok to inject a bit of humour. It's great if you can poke fun at yourself, or make light of an error that isn't too negative, but be careful around sensitive issues. When in doubt, play it safe. Remember, you need to give them a sincere apology and they need to believe it.
5. If it's really bad (such as with the NZ campaign disaster) then make sure the email is signed off by the CEO. People like to know that a serious problem gets taken care of at the right levels, and who's higher than the CEO?
6. If the problem hasn't been fixed yet, then let people know when they can expect it to be, and then let them know when it actually is sorted. Don't babble too much though, nobody likes excuses.
7. Include a valid 'from' address. No-reply@company.com won't cut it. There's a chance that your subscribers will have questions for you, so make sure you include a support email address and/or telephone number.

   At the end of the day, all an apology email really needs to be is timeous and sincere with a straightforward explanation of what went wrong. Do what you can to control and rectify the damage and then get on with it. Bear in mind, your subscribers are also only human. Life goes on; just don't make a habit of slipping up or give your subscribers a reason to doubt your efficiency.

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